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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 010141

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM KMPI JO
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT RESPONDS TO KING'S CALL FOR
DEVELOPMENT; LOWER HOUSE FACTIONS ENGAGE IN INTERNAL POWER
STRUGGLE

REF: AMMAN 09762

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In response to King Abdullah's speech opening
Parliament (reftel), the leaders of the Lower House and the
Senate pledged support for the King's calls for continued
development, modernization and security. Both men agreed
with the King's emphasis on translating economic growth into
improved living conditions, although the Lower House Speaker
singled out corruption as another problem requiring immediate
attention. Two competing coalitions of MPs in the Lower
House earlier brought business to a temporary standstill in a
dispute over control of committees. Deputy Speaker Mamdouh
Abbadi privately predicted some rocky times ahead for the
government's agenda as many MPs feel slighted by the GOJ's
perceived failure to consult with Parliament as a real
partner. End Summary.

"WE AGREE!"

¶2. (U) Senate President Zeid Rifai and Lower House Speaker
Abdul Hadi Majali formally presented at the Royal Court on
December 20 their replies to King Abdullah's speech opening
Parliament (reftel). Both Rifai and Majali vowed full
backing for the King's directive to strengthen economic
growth, reform and security, stating that Parliament would
cooperate with the government to "realize the ambitions of
citizens who should feel the outcome of the development
process." The two leaders jointly embraced the King's call
to attract investment and noted that political development
should proceed in tandem with efforts to enhance security and
stability.

¶3. (U) Rifai separately lauded the King for his leadership
in transforming Jordan into a modern state and urged the
government to expand education and training programs to
increase the skills and capabilities of Jordanians. Majali,
for his part, echoed the King's remarks on how economic
growth has not yet directly benefited or impacted the lives
of many citizens. He also called attention to corruption
(which the King did not mention in his speech), saying that
attempts to combat this problem were "still in the slogans
stage."

POWER STRUGGLE

¶4. (U) The bylaws of the Lower House (Chamber of Deputies)
provide for 14 permanent committees, each comprised of 11
members and led by a chairperson and a rapporteur. While the
bylaws direct that committee members should be chosen by
secret ballot at the start of each new parliamentary session,

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in practice membership has traditionally been decided by
consensus. During the second week of the current session,
however, negotiations between two competing coalitions -- the
National Democratic Coalition (NDC) and the Reform and Change
Coalition (RNC) -- over committee leadership quickly broke
down. The 56-member NDC, which backed Majali as Speaker and
includes four parliamentary blocs, insisted on controlling a
majority of committees while the 52-member RNC, which
supported losing Speaker candidate Abdel Karim Dughmi and
includes the Islamic Action Front, demanded an equal split
(i.e., control of 7 of the 14 committees). When the issue
appeared to be headed for a secret ballot vote, all RNC
members walked out of the Lower House chamber, thereby
preventing formation of the required quorum and bringing
business to a halt.

¶5. (U) After an additional week of wrangling, the NDC and
RNC reached a compromise agreement under which the NDC was
given a majority of slots in eight of the 14 committees,
including the positions of president and rapporteur. The RNC
in turn agreed to control and preside over the remaining six
committees. The influential and hotly contested legal and

financial committees were among the committees awarded to the NDC.

TOUGH ROAD AHEAD FOR THE GOJ?

¶6. (C) The principal architect of the deal hammered out between the NDC and RNC was First Deputy Speaker (and former Mayor of Amman) Mamdouh Abbadi. Abbadi told Acting PolCouns that he did not expect the committee debate to sour relations among MPs as the agreement reached was embraced by both sides. He predicted that the cohesiveness of the two coalitions would soon fragment as divergent, and at times competing, interests among the constituent blocs came to the forefront on upcoming legislative issues.

¶7. (C) Asked about the backlog of provisional laws awaiting parliamentary ratification, Abbadi said that the GOJ shouldn't count on easy acquiescence by MPs. He elaborated that for all the government's talk about dealing with Parliament as "a partner," many MPs felt ignored or even slighted by GOJ officials and were thus more inclined to question the GOJ's legislative agenda. Abbadi noted, for example, that Parliament was not consulted whatsoever on the latest cabinet reshuffle. He also questioned why the GOJ enacted a new provisional law related to military funding immediately before Parliament reconvened on December 1, asking "why did they circumvent us rather than just wait a few days?" Abbadi acknowledged that Prime Minister al-Fayez had conducted a series of recent meetings with MPs to explain the government's goals, but complained that "the real decision-makers, like (Minister of Planning) Bassem Awadallah, won't talk to us."

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Abbadi's comments reflect grumbling from other MP contacts. In addition to resentment caused by perceived GOJ snubs, many MPs are suspicious of reforms that could reduce their patronage powers and perks, while East Bank conservatives -- among the King's most loyal backers -- are wary of progressive laws on social issues that conflict with tribal norms. The GOJ can still bring considerable pressure to bear on MPs to rally support for legislation, but it may have to do more than simply parade the Prime Minister, increasingly seen as a figurehead, to win over skeptical MPs.

HALE